

The Green Dog of Sosua

The Green Dog of Sosua by Dean Borok
Dominican Republic
• Dean Borok

In a world of big 'putas' its impossible for a guy to have a little fun. That's what the little kid discovered, hands cuffed behind his back, as the cop called for a car to pick him up and take him to the 'cárcel.'



A crowd of otherwise unoccupied Dominicans had gathered around to watch the diversion as the cop held the kid with a firm grip and spoke nervously into his cell phone. The little boy was letting out mournful wails of the type I never heard come out of a kid's mouth before. They were the moans of an apprehended crook who knew where he was going and what trials awaited him there.

Magpie and I speedily walked past. If the crowd of men milling around decided that the kid was being treated with unnecessary roughness, all hell might break loose. Even in the best of times the Dominican Republic is a boiling cauldron of heat, poverty and the explosive nature of the population, of which the lid, the ever-present and massive presence of the various forces of order, was liable to blow off at any minute.



Here in Sosúa, about twenty-five kilometers east of Puerto Plata on the north coast, the outward appearances of life are those of an exotic tropical paradise. Brightly colored blossoms explode in the trees. Ocean breakers wash against the volcanic cliffs with picturesque drama. German and British tourists bask topless in hot tubs and on immaculate beaches sipping sweet rum cocktails.

In addition to the indigenous descendants of Spanish, Taino Indian and African slaves, there is a sizable and wealthy population of Germans. There is a Goethe Institute and a Jewish museum and synagogue for a community of Jews who were welcomed here in 1940 and stayed to make a sizable contribution to the country. Election posters solicit votes for one of them, the All-Dominican Benny Katz, in the upcoming national elections.

As Magpie and I continued our stroll down to the Sosúa municipal beachfront, we made way for a battered, antiquated police cruiser crammed with no less than eight cops, rushing to the crime scene. The Keystone Kops aspect of this heap loaded with cops sitting on each others' laps dissolved when we got a look at their faces, which were tired, stressed, overheated and indifferent.

The Sosúa beachfront is one kilometer of palm-fringed white sand facing an emerald bay lined with condos and hotels perched on the edges of high volcanic lava cliffs. The day before, Magpie and I had scoured the whole bay in our snorkeling gear and found some very beautiful coral formations teeming with many varieties of fantastic marine life. The main coral, about 500 meters from shore, swung around in an arc, dotted with small islands of rock on either side. Schools of yellowjacks darted in and out between fan corals and large, orange flower-shaped corals. Fresh, new corals grafted themselves onto mature or moribund formations. Unusual blue-colored brain corals sat beside the normal white brain corals. White, doughy-looking formations formed underwater lagoons with schools of yellow fish swaying to and fro with the current while gaily colored parrot fish chewed on the edge of rocks. Long, stringy trumpet fish glided head-down, perpendicular to the bottom in their strategy to appear like strands of sea grass. Large, menacing sea urchins, some colored a lethal red, were displayed on ledges like spiked figurines in a boutique. Little purple fish with shiny blue dots and feathery little tails darted in and out between schools of giant violet fish as yellow-and-black striped sergeant-major fish approached us, seeking a handout. We observed large fish with red and green checkerboard patterns, odd-shaped black and white speckled solitary cowfish and flat flounders with intricate snake-like designs creeping carefully across the ocean floor. Large grey fish with serious expressions sized us up as potential meals. Schools of needlefish swimming directly beneath the surface brushed by our heads.

The joke of this is that these reefs, an easy swim from the beach, are a closely guarded secret of the snorkeling and diving operators who are in the business of trying to induce tourists to drop large sums of money to be transported to inferior sites farther away. The logic of this is: how can you get a guy to pay fifty dollars and then drive him out in the boat for one minute? So the tour operators pretend the reefs in the bay don't exist and take the tourists the long way around to a minuscule patch of coral far away, like the New York taxi driver taking somebody to Manhattan by way of New Jersey and then charging \$300.

On this day, however, snorkeling was not an option. The Sea God Poseidon was expressing his wrath and smashing breakers against the rocks and cliffs with dramatic fury. Magpie and I tried to swim, but the ferocious undertow swept our feet from under us and the waves knocked us over in a one-two combination that left us sprawled and winded in the sand, feeling lucky to still be alive. As we lay there, we were astonished to see a school of scuba divers appear on the surface of the water, obviously concerned about making it through the surf, weighted down by the heavy oxygen tanks strapped to their backs. One was knocked over by the breakers and dragged back into the surf. She couldn't get up and needed quick help from her fellow divers. We determined to stay on dry land and go in search of a different class of wildlife, the two-legged variety.

This led us to the shanty town of shacks that line the beach road behind Sosúa beach, a phantasmagoria of open-air boutiques hawking cheap handicrafts and improvised beach bars where any drink might be your last. As stray dogs, which are a far cry from the cute little critters that populated Jacques Tati's film "Trafic," rooted through garbage and defecated freely on the otherwise immaculate sand beach, merengue and bachata music blared from boom boxes in the boutiques. Every step or two we were accosted by guys aggressively trying to lure us into the store using English, French or German.

"Come into my place. I want to show you something."

"My friend, don't you have one minute to look in my store?"

And the old favorite: "Do you remember me? We spoke yesterday."

Blah blah blah. After a while you get the feeling of swatting away black flies in the African veldt, so numerous and pestilential do the hawkers come to seem.



Hookers ply their wares there, too, attractive young women in tight white jeans and pink tee-shirts with glittery slogans emblazoned across the front. "Baby Girl" they proclaim, and "Hôtesse de l'Air." The girls navigate through the rutted path in high heels and gird their waists with cheap studded belts from China.

Sosua Cops in the Beetles

This routine of seedy of seedy rum bars and painted whores follows a tradition as old as Hispaniola itself, going back to the days when it was a French colony under Louis XIV. In 1680, René-Robert Chevrier de la Salle, who had for the previous fifteen years explored and mapped the interior of North America from Montreal to Louisiana, received a commission from the Sun King to establish a fort at the mouth of the Mississippi and secure French possession of the whole continent except for the narrow band controlled by England along the Atlantic coast and the Spanish west. To ensure the success of the enterprise, the king had granted de la Salle three ships stocked with the provisions needed to establish and arm a fort, as well as sailors, soldiers and even marriageable women.

During the voyage across the Atlantic, one of the ships fell behind and when the two lead ships reached Saint Domingue, which was at that time a French colony, de la Salle moored them near Port au Prince to wait for the third to catch up.

As soon as the soldiers and sailors saw all the fun going on, with rum, whores, thievery, murder, voodoo and African marimba bands playing night and day, there was no getting them back on the program. A large number deserted and the rest came down with insidious strains of venereal disease that, along with various miscalculations (like the precise location of the mouth of the Mississippi, for example) and poor management skills on the part of de la Salle, caused him to be assassinated by one of his own investors and the rest of the colony to perish of cholera on the plains of Texas in a scenario reminiscent of the final act of Puccini's opera Manon Lescaut.

Unfortunately, these lessons of history, of going crippled and blind, of penises dripping foul-smelling mofongo and falling off like leprosy, are lost on the latest generation of sexual adventurers, mild-mannered older European men for whom sexual stardom is just an economy-class ticket away. Back in their home countries of Norway or Germany, these guys couldn't even get arrested for opening their greasy raincoats and exposing themselves on the subway, the cops probably just giving them a whack on the pee pee and sending them home. But here in the tropics, where twenty bucks will buy you a threesome, they sat together around outdoor café tables, shirtless with little wisps of hair lying limply on their sunken chests like some Cracked Magazine parody of Broadway Joe and the Rat Pack, surrounded by their cheap little coterie of teenage hookers. This is the globalization of sex, with the D.R. one of the main purveyors of cheap pussy to the industrialized world.

The barkeeper, a lovely Norwegian fellow named Tom, filled me in on the background: "Some of these men live here year 'round. Others are here on vacation. They are not doing anything wrong, because the girls are all above the age of

consent. They have to be – the police watch them very closely. If the police catch a man with an underage girl, it's very bad. The cops are very greedy. They'll lock you up and take everything you have and everything you can get your hands on before they'll let you out.

"There are many police. The worst are the National Police. They shake down the girls as well as the tourists. Then there are the local police. Then there is the Politur, which is short for Policía Turística. Those are the good police who protect tourists, though they don't speak English. Then there is the Secret Police.

The girls here have a very short window of opportunity to make money from the tourists. It's not like Europe, where a woman can age and still be attractive. Here they start to decline when they get to age twenty. I've been here five years and sometimes I come across a girl I knew when I first arrived, and let me tell you, it's shocking how they age! "Most people here don't live past fifty because of the heat and the hard life."

At that moment, as if to illustrate his point, a crippled stroke victim hobbled by, supporting himself on an improvised cane, the whole left side of his body useless and twisted out of shape. He looked to be about thirty-five. There are many cripples and amputees stalking the streets of Sosúa. It's not possible for me to draw a comparison to Cuba because I'm not permitted to travel there, but knowing what I have read about that country, that it has an extensive program of medical facilities, it's unlikely that the Castro regime would permit such people to be left to rot on the street like garbage, to beg scraps from tourists until their accumulated maladies cause them to just die in filthy huts and gutters.

And the dogs! It's a shock for a resident of the Upper East Side, where people dress their dogs in coats and hats, arrange play dates for them, where the dogs have their own reserved areas in parks and expensive day care centers to keep them entertained, where people shell out thousands of dollars for heart transplants for their animals, to see a world where nobody takes responsibility for homeless dogs. They are left to fend for themselves until they expire from misery and deprivation without even the most rudimentary animal welfare program! On one occasion, Magpie and I took a stroll to the outskirts of Sosúa. We had a wonderful time taking pictures of the cows and bulls that wandered freely out of their pastures and onto the road, as well as the free-ranging roosters and chickens, turkeys and pheasants. All of a sudden, Magpie brought me up short with a horrified gasp. "Oh my God!" she exclaimed.

Across our path hobbled a three-legged grey dog, one paw withered to a grotesque appendage. Covering the dog's shoulders and extending back down the side of its grey body was a green, iridescent fungus reminiscent, Magpie said, of that which covers the fur of Sumatran rain forest sloths. The seasonal rains and pervasive humidity that dripped from every leaf caused this green fungus to slowly grow on the dog's fur while it rested under its favorite bush. It could not reach to lick the fungus off. The dog loped with purpose, making its way toward an open air Methodist church where congregants were breaking for lunch. The dog was hoping for a handout.

As much as I love the D.R., its beautiful coral and its beaches, the foothills and mountains bursting with lush tropical foliage of every description, its breathtaking scenery that reveals an explosion of greens, browns, yellows and reds that are revealed with every turn in the road, the shades of lighting and perspective that would tax even the interpretive talents of a Gauguin or a Matisse to honorably depict it on canvas, that much do I detest the place for the curse that history has inflicted upon it, the needless burden of exploitation, cruelty and suffering that has been allowed to eat away at its human and animal population like the wretched fungus eating away at the flesh of this pathetic, misbegotten dog!